

Dirty water tied to Alaska quake

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Abstract:

The Alaska earthquake, which occurred about 4:12 p.m. CST on Sunday, sent seismic waves that shook underground wells as far south as Louisiana, which also reported dirty well water, said Ed Mehnert, head of the groundwater geology section of the Illinois State Geological Survey in Champaign.

Full Text:

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Nohemi Colls was nudged awake by her husband, Jose, at 4 a.m. Monday as he left for work. He asked what was wrong with their well water. It was coming out of the spigot black.

The Collses of unincorporated Wayne Township, near West Chicago, may never know for sure, but geologists say the probable cause for the dirty water in suburban Chicago and other parts of the U.S. was an Alaska earthquake centered 90 miles south of Fairbanks.

"We couldn't figure it out," Nohemi Colls said Thursday, when the water in her home was clear, although she was waiting for test results. "We connected the hose outside the house and let it run for about six hours."

The Alaska earthquake, which occurred about 4:12 p.m. CST on Sunday, sent seismic waves that shook underground wells as far south as Louisiana, which also reported dirty well water, said Ed Mehnert, head of the groundwater geology section of the Illinois State Geological Survey in Champaign.

"These things can travel a long way," Mehnert said. "The muddying of the water is the end product of that water sloshing around."

Cloudy well water also was reported in Washington, Idaho, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Missouri and Oklahoma. Officials reported hundreds of wells in Cook, DuPage, Kane, Will, Winnebago and McHenry Counties yielded cloudy or dark water within hours of the earthquake.

The tremor registered a magnitude of 7.9, triggering the automatic shutdown of the trans-Alaska oil pipeline and rupturing a 3-foot crack in the main road between Fairbanks and Anchorage. No injuries were reported.

State geologists are performing tests to make a clear determination, but Mehnert said "a lot of circumstantial evidence points to the earthquake."

Evidence includes records of muddy well water in Missouri immediately after a more severe Alaska earthquake, in 1964, that killed 131 people and was measured at a magnitude of 9.2.

In addition, problems in Illinois and other states arose suddenly, within one or two hours of

Sunday's earthquake, he said. The only other reason for the so-called dirty water is lower water levels in wells, but those problems would have occurred much more gradually, Mehnert said.

Mark Ackerman, vice president of Meadow Equipment Inc., a well drilling and pump service in Carol Stream, said the calls to his company started about 6 p.m. Sunday and continued until about 3 p.m. Monday. In addition to black or cloudy water flowing from spigots, some well water systems stopped pumping when the filters became clogged with sediment, Ackerman said.

Ackerman and public health officials directed people with the cloudy water to run it through an outdoor spigot until the water cleared. Most problems were resolved by Tuesday.

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